Ed Whitsel

Interviewed by Jim King
Oak Harbor, Washington
March 2, 1999

Jim: I'm with Ed Whitsel in Oak Harbor, Washington. It's about 9:00 p.m. but we are not all wound down so Ed will tell some stories about the Alaska Regional Office (Juneau) in the mid-50's and his work with fish. Ed, it is really fun to be here with you and get a chance to talk about the old fish and wildlife days.

Ed: I kept thinking we had the start of the first fisheries program in Alaska when we received an appropriation under the Dingel-Johnson Act for appropriations for the territory of Alaska and under that I was hired and came to Alaska. I established a staff; one biologist in Fairbanks, one in Anchorage, and one in Ketchikan. I was at the Regional Office in Juneau. At each one of these field stations, we selected biological projects to do studies on the different species that we had present. George Warner was in Fairbanks and he did extensive work on the grayling there.

Jim: He was the first biologist to work on grayling in Alaska, wasn't he?

Ed: Yes, then Roger Allen was in Anchorage and he found unique and different problems with the rainbow trout there and Bob Boddy was in southeastern Alaska and he did some work on steelhead, rainbow, and cutthroat. Part of my work was handling a crew to put shelters on some of the lakes. What we had was a development project on the Forest Service lands. In these lakes in southeastern Alaska, we were able to put a cabin on the lakes, 10 x 12 cabin with a gravel floor. It had a stove in it that you could cook on and heat the cabin. We built a skiff from a kit and on the weekend, the sportsmen from Juneau would go out and we would build this boat and put this cabin up. Actually, most of the time was one day and then we went fishing for one day when we were there.

Jim: Well, was this the start of what later turned into the Forest Service recreation cabin program?

Ed: Yes. Actually we built cabins on eight or ten lakes in southern Alaska and they became very popular because you could fly into them and it made the fishery accessible to anybody. You could barely get to these lakes. If you tried, you could take a boat out and anchor it in salt water and then hike back into the lake. Most of the time the only access to the lake was by flying in. They became very popular. In recent years I understand that you have to get reservations in at least a year ahead of time in order to get time on these lakes.

Jim: Yes. They have a new thing now. You can make your reservations through the Internet. Do you remember some of the lakes that you put the cabins on?

Ed: No. I do not remember. We had one on Hasselborg Lake, and one over on Chichagof.

Jim: Well, it doesn't really make any difference. There are quite a few of those now. They have an interesting history so they are more popular than ever. Some have been replaced and rebuilt.

Ed: We designed them with the carpenters in Juneau and they were cut very simply so that you could assembly them pretty readily. We would send one man out with a chainsaw a day ahead of time and he would cut the logs for the base plate and they would go up pretty fast, even painted them in that time. We would take out a Grumman goose load.

Jim: Did Clarence Rhode fly some of those trips?

Ed: Yes, mostly he did. He was very enthusiastic about it at the time. It was one of the popular things that we could do.

Jim: There's not very many people around that remember Clarence Rhode or still talk about him but he was quite a personality in those days. He had a lot of good things going.

Ed: Yes, he was a wonderful boss. I enjoyed him very much. He had a lot of enthusiasm for the recreational programs and he was just very helpful for getting transportation. That was one of the things that we essentially needed. To even do a study on one of the lakes required quite a bit of logistics just to get a crew out there to work on a lake. We did a study on cutthroat trout in Elm Bay Lake in southeastern Alaska and there we found the cutthroat exhibited some unique habits. We thought they would spend some time in the lake but they spent very little time in the lake. They migrated in and spawned in the summertime and then dropped back out into the salt water. The lake was used very little by the fish that were in the stream. We had wonderful steelhead fishing in southeastern Alaska. There were a lot of just beautiful steelhead streams and they were not accessible by boat. Many of them were not fished very heavily at all in the early days. We almost had to find out what was there first and then point the fishermen to those particular streams.

Jim: Bob Boddy was a really enthusiastic steelheader.

Ed: Yes, he was "Mr. Steelhead" in southeastern Alaska. It was a wonderful program in that regard. We stocked steelhead fry in some of the high lakes that had no fish in them at all. They were completely barren and the steelhead exhibited all the characteristics of rainbow trout when they were in there. They maintained the population in the lakes when they were stocked. We took the steelhead eggs out on Kodiak Island and hatched them there and moved the fry down into the various lakes that we stocked and they became quite popular. They took about 1-1/2 years before they got to a size that was acceptable by the fishermen, probably about 12-14 inches. One thing we found in a

study that Roger Allen did up in Anchorage was that we had a lake that we decided we would see just how many fish you could take out of the lake by fly fishing. We set it up so we had a fly fisherman fishing on this lake constantly to study and find out how much of the population you could take out of a lake and how you would have to guard against over fishing in these lakes. There were a lot of lakes along the road system that were quite accessible. One of the worst things I found in doing creel census work was when we ran a check on the number of fishermen per mile of road in Alaska. We found out that because of the limiting number of roads, we had more fishermen per mile of road than all except two states in the United States. It indicated that you had very high pressure on those streams that were accessible to the road system and while you could fly out to some very nice lakes and streams, you could get practically virgin fishing. It was along the road system that they were heavily fished. There was an intense fishery particularly on the grayling streams and those down on the Kenai Peninsula.

Jim: These would have been the years just before statehood, in the late 50's? People almost think of that as pioneer times now.

Ed: We cut trails into some of the more isolated lakes that were accessible by roads. You could drive to and park and hike into the lake, a mile or two and those were very popular but you couldn't get back very far before they were not used by the fishermen. They seemed to like to have things on the platter for them.

Jim: I remember some wonderful places there that you couldn't drive to, like the Tangle Lakes and the Alaska Range where there was really great fishing. They've had that closed in recent years because they are worried about there being enough fish to survive. That was a wonderful network of waters for grayling and lake trout.

Ed: I was trying to recall some of the problems that we had. There was quite a bit of pressure on the trout and Dolly Varden and cutthroat that were preying on the salmon fry and fingerlings. In the early days, they had a bounty on Dolly Varden in Alaska and they

paid 5 cents a tail. Sometimes they didn't identify the tail too well and you could get almost any kind of a trout, and get a nickel a tail for any that you had. That was in the 1930's. The stigma about trout and salmon seemed to persist even when we were there in the 50's. They would feel like when the steelhead came into the stream, about the same time as the salmon did, they said they were coming in to prey on the salmon. It wasn't true because you couldn't find any salmon in the steelhead at all. What they were doing was coming into the stream when the stream was successful and they would then drop back downstream and then they would go upstream into a lake and then drop back down into the outlet stream to spawn in the following spring. They would go right back out to sea from there. Quite often their movements in the streams conflicted with the salmon weirs that were put in for the adults. In the spring when they were counting the downstream migrant salmon, the steelhead were moving in the opposite direction. It was quite a confusing affair. Sometimes you could see where the steelhead were blocked completely by wanting to go back to sea about the time the salmon run was coming in the summertime. They had finished their spawning upstream and were dropping downstream. In the meantime they had put a salmon weir in the stream and it always made super steelhead fishing above the weirs.

Jim: Well, that is interesting. I remember that people didn't regard Dolly Varden as a sport fish, is that right?

Ed: That is generally true. Just out of Anchorage there was a little area that had arctic char which were very similar to Dolly Varden. They were essentially about the same and they were small. They probably didn't measure much more than 6-8 inches long but they were very highly colored. Their fins were brilliantly colored. They made great family fishing.

Jim: These were the landlock or interior Dollies that never went to sea?

Ed: These were just not very far out of Anchorage. They called them "golden fin" and they were a real hearty indigenous char. We shipped some of those back to the National Aquarium in Washington, D.C. We also sent some blackfish.

Jim: I remember George Warner being intrigued with the blackfish.

Ed: These were small fish that were in the arctic streams where the Natives would set traps for mink. In those traps, they would catch a lot of these little blackfish and they were used for food. We were trying to decide if these were mink traps or blackfish traps. They finally called them mink/blackfish traps.

Jim: I remember George Warner – there was always this story that blackfish didn't freeze or they could survive being frozen and George got a little can of blackfish and set them outdoors one night when it was 50 below zero and they didn't survive! The poor blackfish were crushed by the ice by morning.

Ed: We sent some of those back to the National Aquarium too. We did that by bringing them down and putting a big chunk of ice in a plastic bag with very little water in there. By putting a little bit of oxygen and tightening the bag up, they traveled for a couple of days by air back to the Aquarium. They did fine in the Aquarium too. They didn't use much oxygen and the water was very cold and they were very cold. They seemed to have survived well with just a minimum of handling.

Jim: I know Marge talks about how much she enjoyed living in Juneau. Do you want to make any comments about Juneau in those days?

Ed: Juneau was a very wonderful place to live and of course, we all looked forward to the spring coming because you had such poor weather in the wintertime. I think one of the things the Regional Director did in those days was allow a staff picnic on the first sun shine day in the spring. That was always one of the things that people looked forward to

there. We enjoyed the life in Juneau because it was so simple and the road mileage was very limited. You had probably less than 50 miles of road in the whole of Juneau and Douglas, so your recreation was what you made for yourself, like having a wiener roast at Auke Bay. The family life seemed to be the thing. Everybody did things together there. We did a lot of ice skating out at the glacier. When it was cool in Juneau, it would be 5-10 below zero out at the glacier and the ice was thick on the lake and you could take a family out there and do all kinds of activities. Most of our activities were outdoors.

Jim: Well the Fish and Wildlife crowd were all really kind of a family unit.

Ed: Yes. We moved around in each other's homes and we were always getting together for just friendly dinners or picnics. It seemed like you made your own entertainment just by being together. We had quite a problem with frozen water pipes the first year we were there. I think it was the day after Thanksgiving our water pipes froze up and we didn't have water until the following May. My chore was to haul ten gallons of water everytime I came out with my car.

Jim: You had a pretty place as I recall there on Auke Bay Beach.

Ed: Yes, it was very beautiful. There was a lot of sealife moving back and forth along the beach. The humpback whales would come by during the spring when the herring were running. The whales got in very close. At night you almost could tell which whale was coming by the sound of its blow. They had different sounds. We had sea lions, seals, and land otter. I had a dory anchored out in front of my place and the land otters used to fish for flat fish that were about 6-8 inches long

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and they liked to crawl out on my boat and then they would just eat the tail on up to just about where the body cavity was and leave the rest of the fish lying on the bilge of my boat. You could find 20-30 of those in the boat every time you went out. They just ate the back end, wouldn't touch the heads at all.

Jim: The herring was really something around there. The harbors were full of herring and they used to catch them in pens for bait.

Ed: Yes, they had some commercial pens they had set up for that. You could see the king salmon in the spring of the year chasing herring around in Auke Bay. You could see them make a swirl in the top of the water and it would make you a little nervous. We put some cedar boughs in when the herring were spawning and collected some of the eggs on the boughs and we took them home and put them in hot water and cooked them a little and ate them. We just stripped the eggs off the boughs. I didn't really think much of it but they were not bad tasting and apparently everybody did that a little. We used to fish for the herring by just jigging the herring with little blank brass hooks. Then we would go out and use them for fishing for salmon.

Jim: That was really something the way the herring were around there. They are not very common now. Although there have been a few in Berner's Bay the last few years but not around Auke Bay or Tee Harbor like they were then. I hope they come back one of these days.

Ed: I'm not sure that that doesn't change the migration some. They are moving with the feed and if the feed isn't there then their movement is probably shifted to where the feed is and probably you are getting little changes in the local distribution of the fish.

Jim: Fish and Game used to say there was an area somewhere off Auke Bay where there was a tremendous wad of herring in the wintertime, in deep water and they could

measure those with sonar and they always thought that was the major source of herring. I don't know what happened to that theory now.

Ed: I'm not sure. When we were there in the 50's they were abundant in Auke Bay. The pots that the commercial fisheries had out there were pretty standard. They had those fishing for herring. I had come from Canada where I had worked on sockeye salmon and we were quite impressed with the red salmon runs in Alaska. One of the things that puzzled me quite a bit in Alaska was that when the fishery was under the White(??) Act, there was a very great effort to follow the White Act and get your 50% escapement first before you allowed any fish for you at all. In some cases you might have several different strains of fish going into the same lake and spawning in different areas. Under those circumstances, you would maybe catch one particular strain of fish that was going to one particular spawning area in the lake, and in allowing the complete escapement of another, you would almost fish one out every year and then allow total escapement on the others. It always was a puzzle to me why they didn't preserve the different strains of sockeye, particularly in Karluk Lake, where some studies were done and actually demonstrated that these early fish that they allowed 100% escapement on were mainly a little tributary, ice-flowing stream along the lakeshore that had very limited spawning. Those fish were given 100% escapement and then the areas in the rivers between the lakes which had large populations of fish were not fished in the same proportion. It seemed to me that by a different management system, it would be possible to get a better escapement balance between the different strains that were in the same lake system. The study was done on that and the paper was submitted for publication. The editor at the time had been to Alaska and he wasn't sure that that was what was happening or wasn't sure these strains existed as shown and that paper never got published. That was one of the things that I thought was one of the deterrents in the Karluk run. The other thing was, that after the red salmon runs got down pretty low, the fishery shifted to fishing for pink salmon every other year. This did not permit the cyclical dominance that normally takes place with the sockeye because the sockeye then were considered an incidental fishery and they couldn't manage it because it was carried over into the pink salmon cycles, which were every other

year. I don't know whether that makes sense or not! I tried very hard to get them to shift their closures a little bit but that was not possible at the time, and it wasn't my business. It was one of the things that we found in Canada on the Fraser River system. Even where you had gillnet fisheries, you had to have on the river system a closure every weekend of two days. We found it took 42 hours for the first fish to come back in and get past where the fishery was so that when the fishery started, you only had 6 hours of escapement altogether in the two days. By running test nets, we found that we needed 72 hours in order to just get one day of escapement and that changed the whole pattern of the fishery in the river system. I am sure that takes place in some of those places in Alaska.

Jim: There is a big political hullabaloo in Alaska now of management of the fisheries because of a clause in the Alaska National Interest Land Claims Act (ANILCA) about subsistence users having preference or rural fishermen having preference and this has brought back the old song about federal mismanagement and people and the politicians are saying, "well, we had federal mismanagement and it wrecked the fish" and I go back to that and most of the people that are hollering never knew what was going on in the first place and certainly don't know what the issues were then. I wonder if you would want to comment on all of that "federal mismanagement?"

Ed: I think it seemed like the red salmon, because of the White Act and the statement that you had to have 50% escapement before you could fish was probably too rigid in its management and maybe that was what you had to do because the Act said so. On the Fraser, for instance, we felt that we could get by with probably 20% or less escapement and that would provide you with an adequate population. That also depended on whether you provided the fish on the spawning grounds at the peak time of spawning. If you fished the peak time of spawning out, which generally is when most of the fish are there, you could have early fish that didn't survive as readily and late fish that didn't survive as readily so you would have maybe twice as many fish as you needed, but the actual survival was from of the eggs and fry from those fish would be much less. To close down a fishery for a very short period during the peak of the run is a hard thing to regulate.

That's the time when all the fishermen are making the most money and that's one of the problems of regulating and just the timing of the escapement alone can make a big difference in your survival.

Jim: So the federal government was operating under some limitations that have been changed now under the State.

Ed: Pretty restricted in some cases and difficult to manage when your goal of management was 50% escapement and being able to set a time with the optimum survival of the spawners would occur.

Jim: Were you involved with the fishways on the Fraser River and all that?

Ed: Yes. I was one of the research biologists. We tagged the salmon below and above the fishways and determined when the blockades occurred at Hellsgate in 1913, they persisted up until the time we hit. Since that time, the runs have done very well. The runs have come back up.

Jim: That was a very successful operation there.

Ed: Now the management is changing to exchange the catches between Canada and Alaska and the lower state of Washington. Managing these different runs has become much more complex.

Jim: You were saying the fish-farming is having an affect on the wild stocks in places.

Ed: I think that is true. I think there is a very great danger of diluting the genetic strains if you have escapement of fish-farm fish into the streams that have normal populations. It is very critical that these fish that are in those streams are selected over hundreds and thousands of years and in some cases to survive under certain conditions.

This provides them for an optimum time of spawning with the optimum temperature and if you put a variant fish into that, if you add fish into that stock that do not have those characteristics, then they do mix and spawn. You would find a very different memory bank in the fish as they survive. There is also the possibility of disease retained in reared fish because of the hatchery rearing techniques and confined situations that you get in the rearing.

Jim: Then after Statehood, how long did you stay in Juneau?

Ed: I stayed about a year, transferring over both the Federal Aid Programs, the Pittman-Robertson and the Dingel-Johnson to the State of Alaska and then I was transferred to Portland, Oregon. From there I transferred to the Great Lakes in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and then that program there was abolished. I was in commercial fisheries there with the National Marine Fisheries Service and they abolished that region so I was transferred to Gloucester, Massachusetts. Then eventually I was offered a job as one of the four-agency coordinators on the Sacramento River. We were working with the State water project and the Bureau of Reclamation, the Fish and Wildlife Service and the State Fish and Game Department. They each had a representative on the four-agency commission. My work primarily was to supervise some of the state employees doing work on downstream migrant king (chinook) salmon. I did work on downstream migrant salmon to determine the time of migrations, the size of migrations, where the fish were rearing in the delta. Those were all tied into trying to protect them from additional water use from the Sacramento River. We were able to show quite a bit of life history of the migrating salmon in the river.

Jim: Those king salmon in the Sacramento River were wonderful fish. They were great big ones.

Ed: Yes, they were very excellent. There were several different runs. There was the fall run, the winter run, and the spring run. The spring run fish were pretty well all

destroyed by the construction of dams on all the river systems. They were usually the runs that went way up into the interior. They were large fish, somewhat like the Kenai fish. Then the Shasta changed the whole complex of the Sacramento. The Shasta Dam made major changes in the Sacramento River, flow changes occurred by damming the snow melt in the spring of the year and it made quite a change in the temperature structure in the river and migration patterns of the fish. They became more impacted by the runs changing their timing now because of the temperature changes in the river system. Those things happen but then that changes the whole biological migrating pattern and the timing of migration.

Jim: So those big kings are getting kind of rare now?

Ed: I don't there are any of the spring run of chinook left in the system. There use to be large numbers in the San Joaquin and the Sacramento Rivers.

Jim: Do you have any stories about traveling around on the *Grizzly Bear*?

Ed: One I remember very distinctly was one of the birds got a name of being a Ralston turkey. It happened that the *Grizzly Bear* was on patrol right at Thanksgiving in southeastern and Dan Ralston said, "well, we got to have some bird for Thanksgiving" and so happened that a cormorant was the bird that was selected for their Thanksgiving dinner. I am not sure who shot it. I remember the story of Cletus Groves, who was the cook and deck hand on the *Grizzly Bear*. He cooked this bird after it was cleaned and plucked. I think the smell almost ran them off the *Grizzly Bear*. Because Dan was along on that escapade, I think they always named the cormorant the "Ralston's Turkey." They were a wonderful bunch of people on the *Grizzly Bear*.

Jim: Carl Olstead was the skipper? Some of his family are still around Juneau.

Ed: When they were returning to Juneau, they would stop overnight someplace. They always managed to bring us back a big bunch of clams. For some reason or other, the Red Tide was in amongst these clams. They used to have a big clam feed before they came in but this time they almost died. Apparently this bed they had been sampling these clams off of for years became poisoned by the Red Tide.

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